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Lulu

July 1971

I wasn't surprised when Mama asked me to save her life. By my first week in kindergarten, I knew she was no macaroni-necklace-wearing kind of mother. Essentially, Mama regarded me as a miniature hand servant:

Grab me a Pepsi, Lulu.

Get the milk for your sister's cereal.

Go to the store and buy me a pack of Winstons.

Then one day she upped the stakes:

Don't let Daddy in the apartment.

The July our family fell apart, my sister was five going on six, and I was turning ten, which in my mother's eyes made me about fifty. Daddy didn't offer much help, even before he left. He had problems of his own. My father wanted things he couldn't have, and he hungered for my mother above all else. Perhaps growing up in the shadow of Coney Island, Brooklyn's fantasy world, explained his weakness for Mama's pinup façade, but I never understood how he missed the rest. Her sugary packaging must

have kept him from noticing how much she resented any moment that didn't completely belong to her.

Mama and Daddy's battles were the heartbeat of our house. Still, until the day my mother kicked him out, my father was the perfect example of hope against knowledge. He'd return from work each night looking for supper, a welcome home kiss, a cold beer. Mama considered his homecoming her signal to rail against life.

"How many hours a day do you think I can be alone with them, Joey?" Mama had asked just days before he moved out. She'd pointed at my sister, Merry, and me playing Chutes and Ladders on the tiny Formica table stuck in the corner of our undersize kitchen. We were the best-behaved girls in Brooklyn, girls who knew that disobeying Mama brought a quick smack and hours spent staring at our toes.

"Alone?" Beer fumed off Daddy's lips. "For God's sake, you spend half the day yakking with Teenie and the other half painting your nails. You know we got a stove, right? With knobs and everything?"

Mama's friend Teenie lived downstairs on the first floor with five sons and an evil husband whose giant head resembled an anvil. Teenie's apartment smelled like bleach and freshly ironed cotton. Ironing was Teenie's Valium. Her husband's explosions left her so anxious that she begged Mama for our family's wrinkled laundry. Thanks to Teenie's husband, we slept on crisp sheets and satin-smooth pillowcases.

I dreamed of deliverance from my so-called family, convinced I was the secret child of our handsome mayor, John V. Lindsay, who seemed so smart, and his sweet and refined wife, who I knew would be the sort of mother who'd buy me books instead of Grade B faux-Barbie dolls from Woolworth's junky toy section. The Lindsay family had put me in this ugly apartment with peeling paint and Grade C parents to test my worth, and I wouldn't disappoint. Even when Mama screamed right in my face, I kept my voice modulated to a tone meant to please Mrs. Lindsay.

Mama sent us to take a nap that afternoon. The little coffin of a bedroom Merry and I shared steamed hot, hot, hot. Our only relief came when Mama wiped our grimy arms and chests with a washcloth she'd soaked with alcohol and cold water.

Lying in the afternoon heat, impatient for my birthday to arrive the

next day, I prayed that Mama had bought the chemistry set I'd been hinting about all month. Last year I'd asked for a set of Britannica encyclopedias and received a Tiny Tears doll. I never wanted a doll, and even if I did, who wanted one that peed on you?

I hoped Mama's recently improved mood might help my cause. Since throwing Daddy out, Mama hardly yelled at us anymore. She barely noticed we existed. When I reminded her it was suppertime, she'd glance away from her movie magazine and say, "Take some money from my purse, and go to Harry's."

We'd walk three blocks to Harry's Coffee Shop and order tuna sandwiches and malteds, vanilla for Merry and chocolate for me. Usually I'd finish first, wrapping my legs around the cold chrome pole under the leather stool and twirling impatiently while I waited. Merry sipped at her malted and nibbled itsy bitsy bites from her sandwich. I yelled at her to hurry, imitating Grandma Zelda, Daddy's mother. "Move it, Princess Hoo-ha. Who do you think you are, the Queen of England?"

Maybe she did. Maybe Merry's secret mother was Queen Elizabeth.

After Daddy moved out, Mama instituted inexplicable new rules. *Don't open the door for your father. When you visit him at Grandma Zelda's, don't say a word about me. That old bag is just using you for information. And never tell anyone about my friends.*

Men friends visited Mama all the time. I didn't know exactly how to keep from saying anything about them. Not talking about Mama meant being outright rude and disobedient, since seconds after he'd kissed us hello, Daddy's questions started:

How's your mother?

Who comes over the house?

Does she have new clothes? New records? New color hair?

Even a kid could see Daddy was starving for Mama-news.

I felt a little guilty at how relieved I was by Daddy's absence. Before he left, when he wasn't demanding or, later, outright begging Mama for attention, he'd be staring at her with a big, moony face.

I sometimes wondered why my mother had married Daddy. Because I was too young to do the math and figure out the time between their wedding and my birth, it had never entered my mind that I was the reason,

and Mama didn't invite girlie mother-daughter conversation. Mama didn't cotton to anything smacking of introspection. That's probably why she was so close to Teenie. Teenie didn't dip into the deeper meanings of life. She'd spend hours and hours judging Mama's fingernail polish, glancing away from her ironing long enough to pick the tone most flattering to Mama's pale skin as my mother painted one nail after another.

I flipped the page of *The Scarlet Slipper Mystery*, sweat dripping from my arms. Since I could take only six books per visit from the library, I had to time it right, or I'd be stuck on Sundays rereading the five Reader's Digest Condensed Books sitting on our red lacquered living room shelf. Green-bronze statues of fierce-looking Chinese dragons with long, sharp tails bookended the volumes. Symbols of luck, Mama said.

Black onyx boxes in various shapes and sizes with mother-of-pearl inlay covers decorated the living room shelves. They were smooth and cool to the touch. Mama's father brought them back from the war in Japan. Mama's mother, who we called Mimi Rubee, gave Mama the boxes after our grandfather died because Mama demanded them enough to drive Mimi Rubee crazy.

Mama was used to getting what she wanted.

Sun snuck over the walls enclosing our gloomy courtyard and blazed into the bedroom. I flipped and rotated my pillow, squashing it into semi-comfortable lumps, seeking a bit of cool cotton to tuck under my head. Merry, cross-legged on her bed, moved her paper dolls into various constellations. She propped them against the wall, folding down the tabs on first one outfit and then another, moving her lips for the silent plays they acted out for her alone.

Merry was supposed to be taking a nap, and I was supposed to be making sure she did. Merry looked all proud and happy wearing her apple green sunsuit, the one that tied on the top with little yellow ribbons. I hated it because I had to help her pull it all the way down, then tie it back up every time she had to go to the bathroom. Merry loved it because it came from Daddy. Grandma Zelda really picked it out, not Daddy, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want to ruin Merry's good times.

Merry was unusually cute, and I was unusually plain. People stopped us every day, bending down to gush over Merry's black curls or her

Tootsie Pop eyes—the chocolate ones—or to stroke her rosy cheek as though her skin were a fabric they couldn't resist fingering. I felt as though I toted around the Princess of Brooklyn.

Daddy doted on Merry. Aunt Cilla had said that while watching Daddy pop M&M's into Merry's mouth one by one. "Does it ever make you jealous?" she asked my mother. Aunt Cilla, Mama's sister, looked like a puffy blowfish version of my mother.

"Yeah, right. He's a big shot with the five-year-olds," Mama had responded to Aunt Cilla, but really for Daddy's ears.

Merry made Daddy happy. I never did. He'd make a joke or something, and I'd narrow my eyes, wondering if the riddle or knock-knock joke was funny enough to merit a laugh. Then he'd get mad and say, "Jesus, Lulu, do you have to analyze every single thing a person says?"

I switched position on my bed, leaning on the windowsill with my elbows halfway out, trying to catch some breeze. Music from Mrs. Schwartz's stereo blasted through the courtyard. Someone had probably told her to shut it off, which usually made Mrs. Schwartz turn it up. "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" played so loud that I missed hearing the first quiet taps on our front door.

"Someone's knocking," Merry announced and hopped off her bed.

"Stop." I swung my legs off the bed. "Are you nuts? Do you want Mama to kill us? Let me. You're supposed to be sleeping."

Merry jumped back on her bed, landing with her feet tucked under her butt. She was skinny and small for her age. In her green sunsuit, she looked like a grasshopper leaping up.

I tiptoed to the door. Mama used our nap time to take her own nap, her beauty sleep, she called it, and she hated waking before her time. I held a finger to my mouth, letting Merry know to keep quiet. She opened her eyes wide, her Tootsie Pops asking, *Do you think I'm stupid?*

Our bedroom and the front door practically touched. I opened our bedroom door inch by inch, trying to be quiet. The knocking got louder. "Who is it?" I murmured, practically pressing my lips to the edge of the door.

"Open up, Lulu."

I heard my father breathing.

“Come on, Lu. Open it now.”

“I’m not supposed to let you in,” I whispered, praying Mama wouldn’t hear.

“Don’t worry, Cocoa Puff. Mama won’t get mad. I promise.”

My eyes filled a little hearing my pet name. When things had been better, I’d been Cocoa Puff and Merry had been Sugar Pop. He’d call Mama Sugar Smack Pie, because he said that was the sweetest thing of all. Then he’d smack his lips and my mother would throw whatever she was holding at him.

But she’d smile.

“I know you’re scared of Mama, but you have to let me in. I’m your father.” Daddy lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone. “It’s my name on the lease.”

I didn’t know what a lease was, but maybe he was right. I opened the door a pinch, leaving the tarnished chain on, and saw a sliver of my father.

He pulled up real close and smiled. His teeth looked cruddy, as if he’d eaten crackers or something without brushing after. He smelled like cigarettes, beer, and something else. Something scary. Something I’d never smelled before.

He put a hand up against the door and leaned in. The chain tightened. “Unbolt it, Lulu.”

I backed away, wondering if I should get Mama. I felt Merry behind me. I didn’t know if Daddy saw her. I didn’t think so. He would have said hello.

“I’ll get Mama,” I said.

“You don’t need your *mama*. Just open the damn door. I have something to give her.”

“I’ll get her for you.”

“Stop being stubborn. Let me in now!”

He rattled the knob, and my heart shook.

“Get back into bed,” I whispered to Merry. When she disappeared, I reached up for the latch and chain. He let up on the door so I’d have the slack I needed.

“Thanks, Lu.” He touched the mezuzah nailed to the doorjamb, then kissed his fingers. He called it Jewish luck, *the only kind us Jews get*, he’d say.

Then he chucked me on the chin. I pulled back from his acrid tobacco touch, wanting to wash my face.

"You're my peach." Daddy walked down the short hall, turning left at the tiny alcove where he'd wedged in a desk for me.

I hung behind, hovering halfway down the hall, and then slipped into the bathroom, cracking the door enough to hear, though I couldn't see.

"Jesus, Joey, you scared me half to death!" My mother sounded nervous. I pictured her holding up the thin sheet she used for her summer naps.

"Miss me, sweetheart?" my father asked.

"Louise, get in here now," Mama yelled.

I didn't move. I didn't say a thing.

"We need to talk." Daddy sounded slurry.

"Get out; you're drunk. I have nothing to say to you." I heard her get up and my father stomp after her. The refrigerator door opened with a sucking sound. A can popped. They were in the kitchen.

"You had plenty to say when you talked my paycheck out of my boss, didn't you, Miss America?" Daddy shouted. "Did you wiggle your ass real hard?"

Something thumped back in my room. Merry scampered down the hall, her bare feet sounding soft and sticky on the linoleum. I wanted to reach out and yank her into the bathroom.

I heard her stop at the couch, the springs squeaking as she jumped. I pictured her balled up, holding her knees and trembling. You could see into the kitchen easy from the couch.

"Someone's got to feed these kids. What am I supposed to do? Manufacture money?" Mama asked.

"I need that money back, Celeste. Now."

My mother mumbled something too low to hear. I opened the bathroom door wider.

"I'm serious; give it, Celeste. Give it."

Daddy's low voice thrummed like a machine. *Give it. Give it. Give it.*

"Get out before I call the cops."

Something scraped.

"Get out!"

"I need it. I need the money, damn it!"

Something slammed.

My sister whimpered. Had she gone in the kitchen? I should get her.

“Shush, quiet, Sugar Pop. It’s okay.” My father’s words blurred together. I pictured him bending down, kissing the top of Merry’s head as he always did, wrapping one of her curls around his finger and letting it spring out and back.

“Go to Mama’s room, Merry,” Mama ordered.

“Yeah, go to Mama’s room,” my father repeated. Something clattered, as though a whole bunch of stuff fell to the floor. “Bourbon, Celeste? You buying them booze on my money?”

He sounded like he was crying. I slid against the wall and inched toward them.

“Go to your mother’s.” Mama sounded more mad than scared now. “Get sober.”

“You think I give you money to buy liquor for your boyfriends?”

Daddy’s voice had changed again. The teary voice had disappeared. Now he sounded big. Like a wolf. A bear. Heavy banging started. I pictured him slamming and slamming and slamming cabinet doors. Metal screeched, cracking like hinges ripping out of their sockets.

GIVE THE MONEY, MAMA!

“Lulu,” Mama screamed. “He’s got a knife. He’s going to kill me. Get Teenie!”

What if Teenie wasn’t home?

No, Teenie never went out.

What should I say?

I stayed frozen in the hall for what felt like my whole life listening to Mama and Daddy yell. Then I ran down the pitted stairs to Teenie’s apartment. I pounded my fists on her door over the sound of her television. I banged so loud I expected the entire building to come down. Finally, her youngest son opened the door. I flew inside and found Teenie in the living room watching *Let’s Make a Deal* and ironing her husband’s boxer shorts.

“My father has a knife,” I said.

“Watch the boys,” Teenie called to her oldest son as she unplugged the iron without even turning it off.

As we ran out of the apartment, Teenie yelled, "Stay here, boys. Don't move an inch!"

We raced up the stairs. I wondered if I should get someone else to go with Teenie and me. Mr. Ford, maybe. He lived alone. He was a bachelor. Old. However, he was a man, though my father called him a fruit.

No, we didn't need anybody else. My father liked Teenie. He'd listen to her. She'd make him calm down.

We ran into our apartment, me right behind Teenie as she skidded through the living room and into the kitchen. Wide-open cabinets from where my father had slammed the doors open and shut showed our turquoise and white dishes. A broken door swayed back and forth in the strong, humid breeze blowing the curtains.

Mama lay on the floor. Blood dripped on the green and brown linoleum. Teenie fell to her knees, grabbed the edge of her wide cotton apron, and held it over the place on my mother's chest where the blood pumped out the fastest.

Teenie looked up at me. "Call the operator." Her voice cracked. "Tell them to send an ambulance. Police."

I stared down at Mama. *Don't die.*

"Go, Lulu!"

I ran into my mother's room. The phone was next to the bed. Pink. A Princess phone. Merry lay on top of my mother's pink and gray bedspread. Mama would scream her head off when she saw how blood had spread everywhere. The cute green sunsuit that made Merry into a little grasshopper was slashed down the middle, but the bows I liked to make with the yellow ties had stayed perfectly in place.

My father was beside Merry. Blood leaked from his wrists.

"Did you call?" Teenie yelled from the kitchen.

I picked the phone up from the night table, careful not to jar Mama's bed, knowing she wouldn't like it if I did.